

Multi-Agency Cooperation and Partnering Addresses Contaminated Wells in Brown County

This is a story of animal waste contamination of drinking water wells. It can be seen as a success story because of the extensive coordination and partnering efforts of many agencies and individuals, and because the affected citizens were generally satisfied with the broad governmental response to this contamination. Also, this issue received a tremendous amount of media attention, which served to educate the public about Karst (shallow depth to fractured bedrock) areas and their susceptibility to groundwater contamination. It also provided public and legislative support for policy changes aimed at protecting public health without hurting local farmers. While this was probably not the “worst” case of contamination (it happens to some degree each year in towns with this type of sensitive Karst topography) the Town of Morrison ended up in the spotlight, partially because it was a public health issue, but also because this event was preceded by several other controversial and heavily publicized well contamination events in the area. The cumulative impact of these events spurred a local grass roots effort to do something about manure in wells.

BACKGROUND

Animal Waste Specialist Dave Bougie was contacted on February 2nd 2006 about well contamination in the rural community of Wayside in the Town of Morrison. The area was experiencing an early winter thaw, and some residents noticed that their well water smelled like manure. A local pump installer confirmed the contamination by sampling 11 area wells, and informed DNR that five of these samples tested positive for *E. coli* bacteria. This area, like many others in northeast Wisconsin, is geologically sensitive to groundwater contamination. Dave immediately began an investigation jointly with Drinking and Groundwater (DG) staff.

Dave’s investigation revealed that a Permitted Livestock Farm (CAFO) experienced a manure transfer line pipe break on approximately January 23rd near the area of the contaminated wells. Investigation as to a “responsible party” for the contaminated wells ensued, including soil and geologic analysis by DG Hydrogeologist Rick Stoll, and incident investigation and farmer interviews by Dave Bougie and Environmental Enforcement Specialist Anne Van Grinsven. Meanwhile, Brown County staff continued well sampling, and found more contamination in the Wayside/Morrison area. Brown County Health Department contributed by providing free water sampling and education.



The extensive media coverage of this issue facilitated public and political support which **drove DNR policy changes**, including (1) an amendment to the existing **WI Well Compensation Program** allowing individuals in areas designated by DNR to receive up to \$9000 for a replacement well, and (2) a protective **Well Casing Special Requirement Area** in the Wayside/Morrison and other areas in the Northeast Region with Karst topography. Many DNR staff were involved in designating the **Special Well Comp Eligibility Area**, distributing information about the Well Comp Program door-to-door within this area, and

hosting two well-attended and successful **Well Comp Workshops** (see photos) where one-on-one assistance was provided to eligible well compensation applicants.

BROAD DNR MULTI-PROGRAM AND MULTI-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

A **productive partnership evolved** to jointly deal with this issue. Below is a partial list of staff, and their role in resolving this problem.

DNR: **Regional** staff included Basin Watershed Supervisor **Kelley O'Connor** and Drinking and Groundwater (DG) Supervisor **Bob Barnum**, who jointly coordinated the DNR response. Also involved were Animal Waste Specialist **Dave Bougie**; DG Specialists **Gary Paplham, Liz Heinen, Keith Hutchison, and Joan LeClerc**; Regional Water Leader **Charlie Verhoeven**; Remediation / Spills Program Coordinator **Roxanne Chronert** (coordinated “free” drinking water for residents with contaminated wells); Environmental Enforcement Specialist **Anne Van Grinsven**; NER Public Affairs Manager **Tom Turner** (prepared the action plan and communications strategy), and more. In addition, numerous **Central Office/Bureau** staff provided expertise, including DG Section Chief **Mark Putra**, and DG Hydrogeologist **Tom Riewe**, and **Mary Teves** and **Barb Ingram** from Community Financial Assistance.

Brown County: **Land Conservation Department** led by County Conservationist Bill Hafs was and still is very involved (in-the-field investigations for sources, including identifying and abandoning unused wells and sinkholes, buffering, education), as well as **Brown County Health Department** (provided free water sample analysis and education for town residents through April) and **Brown County Zoning** (increased septic inspections and education).

State Agencies: **WI Department of Health and Family Services** and **WI Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection**.

Local: **Morrison Town Chairman Todd Christensen and the town board and staff** were and continue to be very actively involved.

Kelley O'Connor
WDNR
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